

**THE SEMANTIC DIVIDE:
AN EVALUATION OF MORMON SEMANTICS
by Steve Bright**

INTRODUCTION

The semantic barrier is a formidable obstacle to communication between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the cults. In their book, *How Wide the Divide?*¹, Evangelical professor Craig Blomberg and Mormon professor Stephen Robinson attempt to remove the obstacle of “false stereotypes” held by people in both doctrinal camps by articulating their respective beliefs on several doctrinal issues. The joint conclusions at the end of each chapter and at the end of the book *sound* as if Evangelical and Mormon beliefs contain more in common than one might have expected. But there are two reasons Evangelicals have for believing this is not the case. First, Robinson often inaccurately articulates official LDS doctrine and official teaching.² Second, the terms and statements made by Robinson only *sound* similar to what Evangelicals believe. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, Robinson repeatedly obscures the doctrinal differences between Mormons and Evangelicals by equivocating on the meaning of words and phrases. Where he does acknowledge the differences they are rhetorically painted as secondary issues.

This paper will examine a sampling of Robinson's own definitions and use of terms and phrases (some theological, some rhetorical) in *How Wide the Divide?* and point out the equivocation in each case. First, the term or phrase will be given following the page on which it appears in the book. Second, the “Superficial Meaning” (abbreviated--S.M.) will be given. This is the aspect of the term or phrase which is true, and to which both Evangelicals and Mormons *can* agree. It is this *true* aspect on which the equivocation of meaning is made to pivot. Third, the “Significant Difference” (abbreviated--S.D.) will be given. Here the more significant meaning (definition) which Robinson pours in to the term or phrase will be given along with the common Evangelical understanding or definition of the same term or phrase. It is over these underlying definitions that Evangelicals and Mormons differ and divide. It is understood that the definition of the terms and phrases assigned to LDS in general in this paper represent only Robinson's view as found in *How Wide the Divide?* and not official LDS understanding of these terms and phrases.³ However, it should become evident that the divide between even the ecumenically inclined presentation of LDS doctrine which Robinson presents in *How Wide the Divide?* and Evangelical Christian doctrine, when articulated without equivocation of terms, is *very* wide.

¹ Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997).

² Robinson states that he is speaking only for himself and not as an official of the LDS church (p. 14). He does say however that the views which he articulates in this book represent what Mormons believe. This is what Evangelical apologists will challenge at certain points by comparing Robinson's view with orthodox LDS theology.

³ If one examines official LDS doctrinal statements and teaching by Mormon apostles and elders the differences between Mormon and Evangelical definitions and doctrine are even more pronounced since, unlike Robinson, Mormon officials are not trying to appeal to an Evangelical audience and are much less reluctant to speak what they really mean.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS: SUPERFICIAL MEANING AND SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES

(p. 10) “We both interpret Scriptures *literally*.” S.M.--LDS and Evangelicals both reject liberal attempts to completely allegorize or mythologise Scripture. S.D.--LDS have little or no legitimate hermeneutical constraints as to which Biblical texts should be interpreted literally and which should not. For example, Mormons interpret many Biblical anthropomorphisms literally, resulting in the belief that God has a body. Evangelicals constrain literal interpretations of biblical passages by way of literary context, as well as theological and philosophical consistency, thereby precluding absurd literal interpretations (e.g., God’s protective “wing” cannot be a literal wing, neither can his “arm” be a literal arm).

(p. 15) “There is such a thing as LDS *orthodoxy*.” S.M.--The LDS church has a doctrinal standard. S.D.--This standard is not fixed but is defined by the Standard Works of the Church *as interpreted* by the General authorities of the Church, namely, the current apostles and prophets. Robinson states that because the LDS have “no professional clergy, no creeds or catechisms, and no theologians in the strict sense . . . [p]ure LDS orthodoxy can be a moving target” (p. 14). Evangelicals believe orthodoxy is fixed cannot be *reinterpreted* under the guise of “new revelation.” God-given new revelation would never *change* previous doctrine or orthodoxy, only orthopraxy.⁴ Hence, a body of doctrine which can be conveniently changed by LDS apostles or prophets cannot be considered orthodoxy.

(p. 16) “*New Testament Christianity* is true Christianity.” S.M.--First Century Christianity is the only objective standard by which to define true Christianity. S.D.--LDS understand the record of New Testament Christianity as found in the Bible according to the revelations of Joseph Smith (which, in addition to the Bible, comprise the LDS Standard Works) and as interpreted by current LDS apostles and prophets, and excludes Post-New Testament Church councils and creeds. Evangelicals interpret New Testament Christianity as found in the Bible on the basis of objective historical (internal and external) and archaeological evidence which includes the Post-New Testament Church councils and creeds.

(p. 18) “The *gospel*.” S.M.--The Good News of salvation. S.D.--The differences will become apparent as other relevant soteriological terms are examined in this paper.

(p. 18) “The *Fatherhood of God*.” S.M.--God's relation to man is that of a Father. S.D.. Mormons believe this relationship is literal, i.e., God and man are the same *ontologically* (“God and humans are the same species of being . . .” [p. 18]), and man is the *literal* offspring of God. Evangelicals believe the word “Father” in reference to God is figurative. It does not refer to the ontological nature of God and believing humans or to a literal, physical relationship, but to their personal relationship. God relates to believers personally as a Father relates to his children.

(p. 18) “The *brotherhood of humanity*.” S.M.--All men are literally related to one another. S.D.--Mormons define this relationship spiritually, based on mankind's being the spiritual

⁴ Even the new revelation of grace by Jesus in the New Testament did not change Old Testament doctrine, only Old Testament practices.

offspring of God the Father in a premortal existence. Evangelicals limit this relationship to mankind's genealogical relation as descendants of the first human couple Adam and Eve.

(p. 18) “*Premortal existence.*” S.M.--The persons on this planet existed *in some sense* prior to having physical bodies. S.D.--LDS believe this sense is literal. Prior to the creation of this world we existed as spirit beings, being the literal offspring of God. Evangelicals (generally) understand our premortal existence only in the sense of our being in God's mind *potentially* before we existed *actually*.

(p. 19) “*Families are forever.*” S.M.--Earthly familial relationships endure in the resurrection. S.D.--LDS believe “families that come to Christ jointly can, through living and obeying Christ's gospel, be sealed together forever” (p. 19). Evangelicals believe saved family members certainly will know and relate to each other in eternity, but there is no Biblical basis for our being *sealed* together according to our earthly familial relation based on a joint profession of faith.

(p. 19) “*Broader doctrinal framework* into which LDS places the gospel.” S.M.--A doctrinal framework that is more encompassing but *coherently includes* particular doctrinal points. S.D.--LDS have a “different ontological frame or view of the nature of the universe into which Mormon's fit the gospel” (p. 19). In this ontological framework God and Man are the same species, and “the main purpose of the gospel of Christ is therefore not so much to get us to heaven as it is to get us home” (p. 18). “God's work is to remove the distinctions and barriers between us and to make us what God is” (p. 81). Evangelicals have an ontological framework in which God and man are distinct species. God's work is to remove the distinction of *holy* and *unholy* and the barrier of our *sin*, not to make us what He is. For Evangelicals an ontological framework in which God and man *are* the same species cannot *coherently include* a doctrine in which God and man *are not* the same species. “Broader” is not a synonym for “different” as Robinson would like it to be. The LDS ontological framework is *different* (as Robinson admits) from the Evangelical ontological framework, not merely broader, therefore, the message of salvation understood within each framework must necessarily be different.

(p. 19) “*Doctrinal matters of secondary importance; other areas.*” S.M.--These are doctrines on which one's eternal salvation does not rest. S.D.--LDS do not believe salvation rests on one's ontological framework, i.e., salvation does not rest on whether we believe we are *finite humans* being saved by an infinite God, or whether we believe we are *fallen gods* being saved by another God in order to again become gods. Evangelicals believe the most fundamental doctrine is that God is--and we are not Him. A desire to be gods (rulers of our own worlds) is what precipitated mankind's fall, the devastating results being that from which we need salvation. Therefore, one's ontological framework (regardless the level of sophistication) is in this regard certainly of primary importance to one's salvation.

(p. 55) “*Scripture.*” S.M.--Inspired revelation from God. S.D.--Robinson states that the LDS use the term “in a loose sense for any inspired communication.” That is, some “Scripture” is private . . . and has no normative force on the doctrines of the Church. . . . [A] more exact equivalent for what Evangelicals mean by “Scripture” is the LDS term “the Standard Works,” which refers only to the normative, canonized LDS Scriptures--the primary source of official

doctrine for the Church” (p. 204-5). Evangelicals likewise apply this term to any inspired communication from God. However, Evangelicals believe that *all* Scripture has a normative force on the doctrines of the Church, and that scripture is the *only* source of official doctrine for the Church.

(p. 56) “*Word of God.*” S.M.--The expressed thought of God; divine revelation. S.D.--LDS believe in two levels of divine revelation. Initial, immediate revelation to an apostle or prophet is the “pure” Word of God--“as *word* and *hearing* rather than as text” (p. 57). Written, mediate revelation (“derivative revelation”) is subject to human error even when recorded by the apostle or prophet who received it, and is the Word of God only as far as it is transmitted (see “translated” below) correctly from hearing to text. The apostle or prophet receives “what becomes the written Word of God” (p. 58). Divine revelation as written text (recorded revelation) is secondary in authority to immediate revelation (experienced revelation). Evangelicals believe both the mediate and immediate Word of God are *equally* authoritative. Perfect, inerrant mediation of meaning from experienced revelation to recorded revelation is possible and was in fact accomplished in the autographa by inspiration (see “inspiration” below). Jesus and the Apostles attested to the authority of both immediate revelation--“The Word of God dwelt among us,” and mediate revelation--“It is written.”

(p. 57) “*Scripture is inspired (theopneustos).*” S.M.--Scripture is “God-breathed.” S.D.--LDS believe that “what makes [written] Scripture *theopneustos* . . . is not its *written* character but its *revealed* character” (p. 57).⁵ Therefore, since written Scripture is mediated revelation then it is only *mediately* inspired. And, since nontextual, directly revealed Scripture is immediate revelation, then it is *immediately* inspired.⁶ Therefore, written Scripture “is secondary [in authority] to the original revelation itself” (p. 58). Evangelicals believe that what makes Scripture “God breathed” is that it *is* “God-breathed.” Scripture is inspired, *whether spoken or written*, in that “it is a product of His creative power, and so is an authentic disclosure [revelation] of His mind and presentation [revelation] of His message.”⁷ Written Scripture is equal in authority to the initial revelatory experience, it is secondary only in mode.

(p. 60) “Mormons are as devoted to *the pure New Testament gospel* as Evangelicals are.” S.M.--Both are devoted to the verbal statement of the gospel found in the New Testament. S.D.--The LDS believe that some of the New Testament gospel was lost in the Hellenization of Christianity during the first four centuries and in the corruptions of the great church. The purity, or “fullness” (see “fullness” below), of the gospel had to be restored in the latter days and was

⁵ This sentence is very ambiguous. It could mean that the revealed characteristic of written Scripture is the *cause* of its inspiration, or it could mean that the characteristic of being revealed is something that is *added to* Scripture thereby rendering it inspired.

⁶ Robinson argues that the only thing that guarantees correct interpretation of written Scripture is the presence of apostles and prophets. Since the presence of apostles and prophets are necessary in order to *receive* immediately inspired revelation in the first place, then their presence is also necessary to *authoritatively interpret* and apply the correct meaning of it in their communities (p. 58).

⁷ For a thorough treatment of the concept of inspiration as it relates to human language see James I. Packer, “The Adequacy of Human Language,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 199.

restored through the revelations to Joseph Smith (p. 60). The complete gospel has not been available to orthodox Christians (*viz.*, LDS) since the second or third century. LDS are devoted to the *restored* New Testament gospel as understood by the theology of LDS apostles and prophets (p. 61). Evangelicals believe God was able to and in fact did preserve the essentials of the New Testament gospel throughout the centuries. The Hellenization of the early church is not equal to nor did it (of necessity) result in the Hellenization of the New Testament gospel. The corruptions of the great church did at times obscure the preaching of the gospel and for which *reformation* was needed, but it was never the case that the “plain and precious” truths were completely lost from the earthly body of Christ and the Bible requiring a restoration. Evangelicals are devoted to the New Testament gospel as understood by the theology of the historic Christian Church.

(p. 61) “The *fullness of the gospel.*” S.M.--The content of the gospel message fully revealed. S.D.--LDS believe the gospel message in the Bible had become *corrupt* and the content *incomplete* (see above, “pure NT gospel”). The gospel message is fully revealed only when it contains the “plain and precious truths” restored in the latter days through the revelations to Joseph Smith. The “fullness of the gospel” requires content found only in the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price (p. 206). Evangelicals understand the phrase “fullness” in two senses. First, the gospel was fully and completely revealed in message and content in the person and work of Christ (cf. John 1:16,17) in the sense that he fulfilled the Old Testament hope of God's divine salvation through the Messiah. Second, though Evangelicals might also use the term in reference to a complete and uncorrupted gospel message in a particular instance in history, they understand it never was the case that the entire content of the gospel message was missing from the earthly body of Christ or the Bible. The Bible has never lacked the information needed for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

(p. 62) “*Prophet.*” S.M.-- One who speaks forth God's inspired words. S.D.--LDS use the term in two ways referring to “(1) prophets who hold the apostolic keys of the kingdom and preside over the whole church (like Peter anciently or Gordon B. Hinckley today) and (2) local individuals who exercise the gift of prophecy in a more limited stewardship (like Agabus).” (p. 62) LDS believe that *all* apostles are prophets in the first sense, and therefore “do not often distinguish between apostles and prophets, but customarily use the term *prophet* for both.” (p. 62) Evangelicals use the term in three ways referring to: (1) Old Testament individuals who did both *forth-tell* God's message and *foretell* events of the immediate and distant future with 100 percent accuracy; (2) New Testament individuals whose words and actions were specially prompted by the spirit⁸; and (3) New Testament individuals who foretold the future with 100 percent accuracy. Evangelicals believe the apostolic office was limited to those who were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus, and who were given special miraculous “signs of an apostle” authenticating their authority as representatives of Christ in founding his church.⁹

⁸ It is debatable whether in the New Testament having the gift of prophecy made one a prophet or whether God made one a prophet and subsequently gave that one the gift of prophecy.

⁹ For a succinct argument against the possibility of apostolic succession see Norman L. Geisler in *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) pp. 206-13.

Evangelicals believe that since LDS “apostles” (including Gordon B. Hinckley) do not meet these qualifications they have no legitimate claim to apostolic authority. Evangelicals distinguish between the office of apostle and the office of prophet and therefore *do not* apply the term prophet to both.

(p. 64) “*Translation*” (i.e. textual). S.M.--The process of rendering one text from another text. S.D.--For the LDS “*translation* is a broad term . . . which, when applied to the Scriptures, refers to the whole process by which they have come into our hands, including copying, editing, redacting, revising, clarifying, translating, printing, transmitting or even interpreting” (p. 205). It is in this broader sense of the term that the Joseph Smith Translation (JST), which starts with the King James English and ends up still in English, can be considered a “translation” (p. 207). Therefore, for LDS a “translated” text could be in the *same language* as, and have a *different meaning* from the original text. Evangelicals understand that certain physical functions are the *necessary* means of producing an actual translation. But only one thing is *sufficient* to produce translation, i.e., the rendering of the *meaning* of a text from one language into *another* language. This is the definition, purpose, and goal of translation. Evangelicals understand that translation, when done properly, changes only the language and *not* the meaning. For Evangelicals a correctly “translated” text must be in a *different language* from, while retaining the *same meaning* as the original text.

(p. 79) “*No man has ever seen God.*” S.M.--No *mere* human has ever seen God. S.D.-- LDS believe that God cannot be seen by *mere* humans, but God can be seen by *exalted* humans. Humans can be lifted up beyond their “merely” human condition and literally see God (p. 79).¹⁰ The ontological limitation which keeps us from being able to see God applies only to our mortal existence. Once man has “become what God is” we will be able to see God's material body. Evangelicals believe that inability to see God has to do with the nature of God not with the mortal condition of man. The nature of God is *to be* (Ex 3:14). He is the ground of all being and as such cannot be subject to change, i.e., he cannot *become* other than he is. Matter exists in time and space and is subject to change. Therefore, since God cannot be subject to change, and since he

¹⁰ Robinson states that “certain Scriptures, which the LDS take *literally* . . . confirm that “mere” human beings can be lifted by God above their “merely” human condition and then see God spiritually.” (p. 79) Here he is saying that exalted humans have *literally seen God spiritually*. Evangelicals agree that the *act* of seeing is literal (e.g., Gen 32:30; Mt 5:8, etc.), what we deny is that the *object* of this literal sight is a literal *body*. This is clearly what Robinson is trying to prove, i.e., that God has a literal, corporeal body that can be seen. So his categorical argument, “Things that can be seen have literal physical bodies, God has been seen *spiritually*, therefore, God has a literal physical body” is invalid because it equivocates between *physical* sight and *spiritual* sight.

Robinson’s other categorical argument in this regard is also invalid, “If the Bible makes no unambiguous statement denying the materiality of the Father, then we need not deny the materiality of the Father, the Bible makes no such statement, therefore, “we may . . . think of him either as having a body or as not having a body without “contradicting” the Bible” (p. 79). This argument commits the formal fallacy of affirming the antecedent. In other words, it could be the case that there are valid reasons other than unambiguous Biblical statements which are sufficient cause for us to deny the materiality of the Father. Robinson admits that these reasons come from philosophy, but he makes no argument for why he believes them to be invalid other than that they are not unambiguously stated in Scripture.

does not exist in space and time, he cannot be material.¹¹ Even if man could be “exalted” to a state of divinity (he cannot), God’s essence would still be immaterial and therefore invisible to the physical eye. God can only be seen figuratively, that is, spiritually.

(p. 80) “Mankind is created in *the image of God*.” S.M.--Mankind is created with characteristics which God possesses. S.D.--LDS take this literally. “By definition an image is the representation of physical qualities” (p. 80). Therefore, God has a physical image and mankind was created in it (p. 80). Evangelicals believe that God has an image in which we are created, but this image is not literal. “Image” is not by definition limited to representation of physical qualities. The image of God exists “formally in human personality (moral responsibility and intelligence) and materially in the knowledge of God and his will for humankind.”¹² Even if “image” in some sense includes *our* physical qualities (as it seems to in Gen 1:27, “male and female” created in God’s image) the non-materiality of God precludes this from being the material aspect of our physical qualities.

(pp. 80, 82) “*Partake of the divine nature*.” S.M.--Possessing by regeneration the characteristics of God. S.D.--LDS take this quite literally; the saved person can *become* exactly what the resurrected and glorified Christ is, *viz.*, divinity. “God’s work is to remove the distinctions and barriers between us and to make us what God is” (p. 81). Robinson’s argument is: Jesus is divine, the saved become like Jesus (ontologically), therefore, the saved become divine (p. 81).¹³ Evangelicals have an ontological framework in which God and man are distinct species. God’s work is to remove the distinction of *holy* and *unholy* and the barrier of our *sin*, not to remove ontological distinctions in order to make us what he is. Becoming like Jesus does not refer to his ontological nature but to his moral nature. In the context of 2 Pet 1:3-4 becoming partakers of the divine nature means we share in the moral aspect of that nature not the ontological aspect.

¹¹ The fact that Jesus was God and yet had a body is not a theological or philosophical problem since he had two natures and his material body belonged to only one of them. Jesus (the God-Man) did not have a material body as *God* but as *man*.

¹² “Image of God,” in *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1991 ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell, 239-40.

¹³ Robinson says “the logic of the Scriptures is inescapable: (1) Jesus Christ is divine, and (2) through the atonement and the grace of Christ the saved become one with Christ, become like him (1 Jn 3:2) and receive his image and glory (Jn 17:21-23; 2 Cor 3:18). Therefore, (3) through the atonement of Christ the saved become in some sense divine” (p. 81). But Robinson has committed a simple four term fallacy. The predicate in the second premise (“one with Christ,” “like him,” “his image and glory”) is not the same as the predicate in the first premise (“divine”). To simply state they are the same is not inescapable logic but circular reasoning. But even if we supply the missing premise the argument is still not proven sound. That must be done on the levels of exegesis, theology and philosophy. Evangelicals know the argument is unsound because (a) in their Scriptural context those terms do not mean “ontological nature of divinity,” and (b) theologically and philosophically it is impossible for humans to *become* divine. 2 Peter 1:4 says that what the saved *become* is *partakers* (*koinōnoi*, fellowshippers, sharers) of the divine nature, which is a relational term not an ontological term.

Two additional things must be pointed out regarding this argument. First, that “the saved become *in some sense* divine” is not a very watertight conclusion to an “inescapable” argument. Second, Robinson is unjustified in this use of logical deduction built on Scriptural premises when he denies the early church councils and Evangelical systematic theologians the use of the same tool. This use is especially unjustified since he states of the Mormon conclusion: “We do not deduce this by philosophical argument; it is flatly stated in the New Testament” (p. 81).

(pp. 80, 81) “*Children*”; “*offspring*”; “*begotten*”; “*heirs*” (-of God). S.M.--Some (or all) humans are related in some way to God. S.D.--LDS take these terms literally and apply them to regeneration. In LDS theology God, along with a human female counterpart, fathered (sexually) the premortal spirits of humans. Our relationship is therefore ontological. Hence, in LDS soteriology these terms are all in reference to regeneration of the saved man's *ontological* nature. “We are his offspring . . . , and offspring grow up to be *what* their parents are” (p. 80, emphasis added). Evangelicals believe none of these terms refer to a physical reproductive (i.e., sexual) connection between our ontological nature and God's. In context, the first three terms are figurative, the last positional: (Rom 8:15-17) *children* = spiritual children by adoption; (Acts 17:28-29) *offspring* = creations of God; (1 Pet 1:3) *begotten* = spiritual birth; (Rom 8:15-17) *heirs* = recipients of heavenly rights and privileges.

(p. 82) “Believers are *one in Christ as the Father and Son are one.*” S.M.--In Jesus believers possess a unity which like the Father and the Son's unity is both *qualitative* and *quantitative*. S.D.--LDS believe this oneness is ontological. They believe that Jesus bridged the gulf between fallen humanity and exalted divinity so that, “in our saved and glorified state we will be what God is . . . , even in God's so-called incommunicable attributes” (p. 82). Oneness refers to the qualitative unity *of divine attributes* between God and humanity and the quantitative unity *as divine nature*. Evangelicals believe the barrier which Jesus Christ bridged between fallen humanity and exalted divinity was a moral barrier not an ontological barrier. The oneness referred to in John 17:21-23 is the qualitative unity *of fellowship* between believers and the quantitative unity *as a spiritual body* of believers.

(p. 129) “The *Trinity; One God in three persons.*” S.M.--God is one *in some sense* while at the same time three *in some sense*. S.D.--LDS believe God's oneness is not ontological but figurative.¹⁴ God is one in the sense of “oneness of mind, purpose, power and intent” (p. 129). The Son and the Holy Spirit are “God” only as they are one with the Father in the Godhead (p. 132). God is three in the sense of persons *and* being. The Father and the Son can remain separate beings with separate and individual bodies. The LDS “trinitarian” formula is: “One God (mind, purpose, power and intent) in three beings” (p. 132). Evangelicals believe God's oneness is ontological and not merely figurative.¹⁵ God is one in the sense of being, and cannot be more than one being.¹⁶ God is three in the sense of persons. The Evangelical Trinitarian formula is: “One God (one being) in three persons.”

¹⁴ By implication this says the nature or essence of God as God is not *being*. But this contradicts Ex 3:14, “I am,” literally, “I *be*.” See also footnote 15.

¹⁵ Evangelicals also understand that the Son and the Father's ontological oneness spoken of in John 14:11 is not limited by the figurative oneness spoken of in John 17:21-22 and therefore can acknowledge God's oneness in both senses. However, in the orthodox Trinitarian formula “One God in three persons” God's oneness is understood as ontological oneness of being.

¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas argued that because God's *essence* and *existence* are the same God's *being* cannot be multiplied. “Whatever individuates a common essence is not multiplied. Although many men can exist, this particular man can only *be* one. If any essence, therefore, is individuated through itself, it cannot be multiplied. But the divine essence is through itself individuated, inasmuch as God's essence is not distinct from his existence, since we have proven that God is his essence.” *Compendium of Theology*, c. 15 quoted from *An Aquinas Reader* (Garden City, NY; Image Books, 1972) ed. Mary T. Clark, pp. 125-6.

(p. 86) “*gods.*” S.M.--Divine beings separate from and above humanity in nature and power. S.D.--LDS believe those called “gods” in the Bible exercised divine power. Saved men will be exalted by God's grace to be “gods.” Such beings “participate in the divine nature and exercise divine powers, including the power of creation . . .” (p. 88). These beings forever remain subordinate to God and contingent upon him for their existence. Mormons believe the existence of many gods is not polytheism. Evangelicals believe there can be only one infinite, perfect being.¹⁷ This being is the ground of all being and is not contingent. Humans cannot become what God is, since contingent being cannot become non-contingent being, caused being cannot become uncaused being, and finite being cannot become infinite being. Evangelicals believe the description “gods” (e.g., Ex 7:1; Ps 82:1-6; Jn 10:34-36) is used in a figurative sense and does not indicate the existence of other gods besides Jehovah God. Evangelicals believe the existence of many gods is polytheism.

(p. 134) “*The full divinity of Jesus.*” S.M.--Jesus is divine in his being. S.D.--LDS believe Jesus' divine being is separate and distinct from that of the Father and the Spirit. Jesus is the archetype of the kind of *ontological* being saved humans will become upon their exaltation to “gods.” Jesus has been fully divine by the will of the Father from the beginning (p. 134). Jesus received his divinity as a result of literal conception between a divine Father, God, and a mortal mother, Mary (p. 135). Evangelicals believe that Jesus' divine nature (being) is inseparable from the divine nature (being) of the Father and the Spirit. Human ontological nature (whether Jesus' or ours) can never become divine ontological nature. Jesus (The Word, Jn 1:1,2) was fully divine ontologically from before the beginning, not *as a result of* the will of the Father.

(p. 144) “*Salvation.*” S.M.--Being rescued by God. S.D.--“[LDS] generally use the term “salvation” to mean completed salvation or “glorification,” that is, actually *receiving* the heavenly, resurrected glory which is now in the future” (p. 155). It is not equivalent to conversion. “LDS see “being saved” at conversion as just the beginning of a process of becoming like Christ.” (p. 147).¹⁸ Evangelicals recognize that the term “salvation” or “saved” in the New Testament may be used in *past* (was saved), *present* (am being saved), or *future* (will be saved) tense. However they do generally recognize that in a distinct way the term “salvation” refers to

¹⁷ Norman Geisler summarizes St. Thomas Aquinas' argument for the uniqueness of God. “God's perfection argues for his unity. If two or more gods existed, they would have to differ. And in order to differ one must have what the other lacks. But an absolutely perfect being cannot lack anything. Therefore, there can only be one absolutely Perfect Being.” *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), p. 106.

¹⁸ Robinson argues that “At first—just after accepting Christ—we may not be very much like him. *This does not really matter*, for *even then* we are justified before God by Jesus' performance and not our own” (p. 147, emphasis mine). But Robinson then contends (as do all those who teach “Lordship salvation”) that some time later our likeness to Christ *really does matter*. For if some time later there is no quantifiable evidence of conversion (i.e., works) or if there is later a failure to live up to a commitment of obedience, then according to Robinson (as well as the Lordship teachers) a real salvation never occurred. But this position must answer the question, at what point then does obedience begin to matter in regard to justification? If it *does not really matter* at first, when does it begin to matter? And, what biblical evidence is there that the condition of being surely justified before God while being outwardly unconformed to Christ eventually ceases to be a possible condition? Surely the possibility of living in this condition has not changed simply because time has passed since spiritual birth has occurred.

the initial event of conversion. This event is simultaneous with the *act* of justification by God and as such is not the beginning of a process of justification but of sanctification.

(p. 155) “*Salvation by works.*” S.M.--Being rescued by God as the result of works. S.D.--LDS use this term to mean “keeping our Christian obligation to serve Christ and make him Lord of our lives *so as to* [emphasis mine] finally receive our promised blessing¹⁹ at resurrection. . . . It is a positive term for serving and obeying Christ *after* conversion and not falling from grace” (p. 155). Evangelical use this term generally to mean “the false view that an individual can earn salvation or be justified by personal merit without needing to rely completely on Christ. . . . [It is] something erroneous that someone might attempt *before* or *instead of* coming to Christ” (p. 155).

(p. 156) “*Born again.*” S.M.--An event associated in some way with salvation. S.D.--LDS believe that “it is impossible to be born again without faith in Christ, repentance and baptism . . . these things *constitute* being born again” (p. 157-8). Obedience then is not a condition for being born again, but an *obligation* that being born again incurs (p. 157).²⁰ Evangelicals generally understand the term “born again” in reference to regeneration (receiving a new spiritual nature) of the believer. Its meaning is somewhat clearer in its more literal translation from John 3, “born from above.” It is an exercise of divine power, not explicable in terms of human resources or efforts.²¹ Those who are being “born again” are as entirely passive in spiritual birth as they are in physical birth.

CONCLUSION

Robinson states that “common ground here to both Evangelicals and Mormons is found in an attempt to be loyal to the New Testament gospel, *though we certainly understand it differently*” (p. 60, emphasis mine). Certainly it is admirable to attempt to find common ground with those with whom we disagree. But to attempt to dismiss differences by equivocation precisely at the point of disagreement is at best irresponsible, at worst deceptive. Another Jesus is another Jesus, and another gospel is another gospel regardless the respective loyalty to them. Unfortunately, by obscuring the exegetical, theological and philosophical differences between Evangelical and Mormons, *How Wide the Divide?* in fact only perpetuates the ecumenical divide it attempts to bridge. Only by clearly delineating these differences can Evangelical/Mormon dialogue concerning the true New Testament gospel ever be fruitful.

¹⁹ If by “promised blessing” Robinson means “our rewards for faithful service,” then Evangelicals could agree. However, from the context of Robinson's theology “promised blessing” means the consummation of our justification and right to be children of God. With this Evangelicals must disagree since works can in no way be the cause (“so as to”), before or after conversion, of receiving justification.

²⁰ Robinson clearly bends LDS theology as far as possible towards an Evangelical understanding of justification. But the position he articulates in this book is very similar in many respects to Roman Catholicism in that it stops short of justification by grace *alone* through faith *alone*. In both systems works are not a prerequisite for being born again (regeneration), but they are backloaded into justification as a requirement on man's part. In LDS soteriology the requirement takes the form of an “obligation to stay in the gospel covenant” (p. 159). In Roman Catholic soteriology it takes the form of “progressive justification” by participation in the sacraments.

²¹ *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1991 ed., s.v. “Regeneration,” 425.

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